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**Workshop 4: *Getting and Holding Seasonal Staff***

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### **Introduction**

Problems of staff shortages are often mentioned as though nothing can be done about them, but in fact there is a lot managers of vineyards or wineries, or for that matter any other enterprise, can do about them. In this short paper I want to present some ideas which Bragato Conference participants can take takeaway for further thought. They are based on a lifetime of dealing with issues of casual, seasonal and temporary staff, first as the son of a Kent hop and fruit grower and more recently specialising in industry employment issues at Lincoln University.

In this paper I want to divide my thoughts up into four major parts. The first two are concerned with the *Getting* part of the title and the second two with the *Holding* part. After an initial discussion of manager=s staff planning, the focus is on what is known as *Realistic Recruitment*. The second part is concerned to build upon the foundation built by a process of *Realistic Recruitment* and focuses on the supervisory factor and the role that pay does and should play. It is concluded by a consideration of the importance of managing any terminations of staff in a way which will have least damaging effects on the business. My whole approach is built upon a desire to create employment relationships which are characterised by *Matched Expectations*. Such an approach tends to reduce employee turnover and lengthen job tenure. Job satisfaction is increased and commitment enhanced, while job productivity is improved (Tipples, 1996).

### **Getting Staff**

#### *Planning*

An important part of any managerial job is planning, not least where labour is concerned. Seasonal needs vary from one enterprise to another. Pruning, vine training and grape harvesting all have different requirements in terms of experience and skill. The manager=s task is to match the available capabilities of the current or planned work force with the requirements of the enterprise. Initially that will involve forecasting the staff needs of your particular enterprise. If it has been in existence for some time you will have some idea of the numbers of staff needed. Analysis of past staffing records can be very useful to assess numbers and whether any factors caused unexpected losses of staff. For a new enterprise it is more difficult as you will be unaware of the labour requirements of your particular growing system in your situation. There is no quick fix solution. Having more labour available rather than less should prove less stressful.

#### *Scheduling staff*

An important part of planning is the scheduling of the recruiting process so that you have the right number of people with the right skills available at the right time. That may mean you have to start the process much earlier than you might have thought. Potential employees are not waiting out there just for your job. Seasonal staff may have to integrate a number of job opportunities. For example, if there is a need to train up seasonal workers in a particular skill there will be a need to allow for both their recruiting and training in that skill, and perhaps for some work experience before they are up to full working speed. Staff training of casual or seasonal staff is not just a desirable objective these days, but a legal necessity. Under the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 employers are expected to have staff trained up so they can recognize hazards in the tasks which they perform, which might cause harm to others or themselves. An employer who has trained staff highlighting such hazards is much less likely to get into trouble with *Occupational Safety and Health* (OSH) than one who has not. Think about any hazardous jobs your temporary staff are involved in (e.g. using pneumatic pruners, operating machinery?). Have they been appropriately trained?

### *Attracting staff*

Possible ways of attracting staff include the obvious one of advertising in appropriate places. The main newspapers may not be particularly appropriate for your potential seasonal staff. Neighbourhood and community papers may be more appropriate, or at the local dairy or 7-Day store. Another way can be through the social networks of existing staff, or other community networks which may be pleased to help provide work for their members (e.g. local marae, churches or rugby clubs). One important factor is your own reputation as an employer. Word gets around if you do not treat employees fairly and reasonably. In terms of recruiting it is worth building up a reputation as a good employer, and being careful not to jeopardise that reputation by unthinking and intemperate managerial actions. Social networks are also useful because they help to get the right match of expectations, and because those introducing new staff have a vested interest in them performing adequately.

WINZ here in Napier has just begun to encourage labour contractors who will be able to provide staff for a range of horticultural activities. Perhaps you need to talk to your local labour contractors early before others have engaged their services. Another suggestion made to me recently by a student supervising a large team of pruners for a major Marlborough winery was to target leading guys from freezing works. Pruning teams provide them with a social form of work in the off season, and they attract their mates too to join the team, which is another valuable use of informal social networks. Such a pro-active recruiting strategy recognises the important part played by work as a social activity as well as just an economic necessity. An employer would be foolish to ignore that.

Special measures may be needed if your vineyard is in a relatively remote location. Have you tapped into the labour force who is there already, but not working. Young mothers might be pleased of the chance of some work out of the home, and the social contacts that it may provide. Child minding may then become an issue needing attention, as also flexibility in work times to accommodate school hours. Much viticultural work does not involve heavy lifting tasks, perhaps senior citizens would be interested in a few weeks work from time to time. Generally they have very good work attitudes and habits. Established residents in a district are more likely to be available another season as well, so retraining is less of a

problem. Would the provision of transport for groups from out of your district be another possibility, allowing you to tap into another labour force?

### *Realistic Recruitment*

You can identify many potential sources of staff but that is no guarantee that what you have to offer them will be sufficient to get them to work for you. The purpose of *Realistic Recruitment* is to match the expectations that you, the employer or manager, have of your staff, and their own expectations from working for you.. That way they will be more likely to stay working for you and not leave at a crucial moment. It is an employment strategy not a technique. The Employment Relations Act 2000 requires all employees to be provided with a description of the work they will be doing. This statutory requirement is the opportunity to establish your process of realism.

### *Job descriptions (or Realistic Job Previews)*

What does all this mean in practice for the average grape grower? The connecting point between the Employment Relations Act 2000 and a policy of *Realistic Recruitment* is the type of Job Description used. The model I recommend is quite old but fits my overall philosophy of recruiting realistically. Such a Job Description needs to answer the following three questions, neither too briefly nor too fully:

1. What does the worker have to do in this job?
2. How, where, with what and with whom does she or he do it; and how is she or he rewarded?
3. What are the requirements (e.g. a diploma/degree, a driving/HGV license, lack of criminal convictions etc.) of the job?

Too brief and the description will not convey the critical information for establishing clear expectations. Too long and it will be impossible to sort out what is critical from what is trivial. Two other factors should be made quite clear to help the degrees of realism. The job description must indicate the *difficulties* of the job (e.g. responsibilities, need for disciplining colleagues, having to make decisions etc) and the *distastes* of the job (e.g. dirty work, cleaning the vats, pesticide application, long periods of boring repetitive activity on your own etc). Not only does this information have to be conveyed to the candidate through a job description, but it should also form a part of an advertisement for the job, or any additional information provided to candidates. In neither case should the *difficulties* or *distastes* be omitted. The key is realism; to avoid unrealistic expectations about the job; and to permit the formation of a good psychological contract with matched expectations (Tipples, Hoogeveen and Gould, 2000). Such realism will also have one other positive advantage. It will encourage candidates who are not prepared to tolerate those conditions to withdraw their applications or never even to make them. This is good for the grape grower because they will not be a source of paperwork if they drop out of the recruitment process, and because they would have always been a potential problem if they had been recruited.

Some of these points have to be provided to comply with the Act, but the Act does not suggest a strategy of *Realistic Recruitment* and all that goes with it which can be very beneficial to employers facing recruiting problems. Providing the further information

suggested (How, With what, With whom, the requirements of the job, and the *difficulties* and *distastes*) all helps to describe the overall job situation more comprehensively and realistically. Provision of this small amount of extra information should make the job description so much more valuable for the prospective employer and prove a useful tool in discouraging uncommitted applicants.

*Realistic Recruitment* is also valuable as it shows the employer as honest and trustworthy. It indicates that the employer values their staff as an integral part of the enterprise. For staff are not unthinking inanimate human resources but thinking, feeling people with attitudes and aspirations, values and beliefs. Feeling they are valued is more likely to generate commitment and the preparedness to A...go the extra mile@ when the employer needs it. Another factor helping show how the employer values their seasonal or casual staff is how they are introduced to their jobs. A good induction will help the new staff members become effective far more quickly. In terms of maintaining matching expectations it is when the most unrealistic from the recruitment process can be dispelled so the job starts off on the right footing. Staff turnover is usually highest in the early days of a job. A good induction programme can prevent this. Clear communication about what must be done, where and when, with a good explanation of the facilities of the employer will be essential to get them working effectively as soon as possible (Feldman, Doeringhaus and Turnley, 1994, p. 61).

The value of work training has already been highlighted in the context of the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992, but it also has a valuable function in showing seasonal staff that they are not just there for a job but as a valuable part of the enterprise whose contribution matters (e.g. Good pruning as a result of training can help improve grape quality).

### **Holding staff**

Once the appropriate staff have been recruited it is most important to keep them. Making sure their expectations of the job continue to match with the employers= is vital. The potential of the new relationship is set at recruiting, that potential still has to be realised.

### *Work organisation*

Work has lost much of its intrinsic value with the advent of the factory production line in which one person does one very simple operation countless times and never sees the job as a whole. The value of doing the whole job is now recognised again in industry. We can also take advantage of it in viticulture. Take pruning for example. Some vineyards concentrate on getting the pruning done quickly, with pruners cutting out the surplus wood fast on piece rates (contract rates) and then another more experienced and skilled hourly paid pruner coming along behind them and tidying up. The alternative is to have the pruner do the whole job with the full range of responsibilities. Then they develop skills and take pride in their work. Another strategy is to rotate staff through a series of jobs so that all have a chance at each task. Variety is said to be the spice of life!

### *Pay*

Pay rates are always a tricky issue. Grape growers appear to favour contract rates for most seasonal staff. The real problem is at what level to set them. Generally they are expected to

give a 10 percent premium over equivalent hourly rates. A couple of sensible rules may be suggested for maintaining good staff relations. First, they should not be set too high to begin with. It is always easier to raise than lower a rate. So starting low and working up is the right way to go. Secondly, for seasonal tasks which require the whole labour force to hold together until the end of the job a cumulative bonus can be very useful. Either this can accumulate from the commencement of work, or after a set number of days or weeks. Those working longest then accumulate the maximum amount of bonus.

### *Supervision*

Taking advantage of the social nature of work has already been recognised as valuable in recruiting, but it also extends to work organisation. Getting appropriate supervisors to look after work teams is vital. For different ethnic groups it may be necessary to have supervisors with the appropriate social status. For Maori this would be *mana*, as well as the necessary work skills and organisational abilities. A qualification alone will probably be insufficient. The supervisor will need to be sociable with the workforce and down at their level. Language at their level is important too and any form of elitism or favouritism should be avoided. Supervisors need to be in tune with their teams, encouraging them, especially the weaker performers. Individual coaching and encouragement may be necessary, but not in such an obvious way that it highlights the weaker performance. Encouraging competitiveness among a team can also stimulate the performance of a boring task. The *Silver Secateurs* has tapped this vein of converting intrinsically boring work, pruning, to fruitful competition in much the same way as the *Golden Shears* converted shearing from hard labour to a sport.. Now boring work can be viewed as training for the big event, with prize winners achieving status in the industry as contributors to quality wines. Supervisors can do much leading by good example and working alongside their team. Employers would do well to note that supercilious and elitist behaviour will do nothing to endear them to their staff, which may have disastrous consequences at adverse moments.

### *Terminations of employment*

One of those adverse moments could be when a seasonal worker has performed inappropriately or not at all. How this situation is handled will tell the other staff how much they are valued really. It is always important that supervisors or managers are scrupulously fair, particularly in the event of inappropriate behaviour. If the issue is one likely to end in *Asacking@*, it is necessary to follow the appropriate due process of warnings of the danger of continuing the behaviour which is problematic. Also, sufficient time must be allowed for amendment of that behaviour. Chance must always be given to explain what may appear to have been bad behaviour, otherwise there will have been no natural justice in the dismissal procedure. That could prove costly if a personal grievance eventuated. Any events likely to be regarded as totally inappropriate should, of course, have been advised at the beginning of employment as part of the induction programme. To mishandle a dismissal sets a poor example for remaining staff. Poor morale leading to a degree of >survivor sickness= may result. This is when other staff leave because they do not like what they see and choose to >jump= before they are >pushed= from their jobs. Mishandling a dismissal also sends very bad messages to the outside world about the state of employment relations in the enterprise.

### **Conclusion**

The key to **Getting** and **Holding** seasonal staff is establishing sound employment relationships based on mutually matching expectations. These will be built up through a process of *Realistic Recruitment*. Maintaining those expectations in the face of changing personal and business circumstances is facilitated by recognising the social nature of work. Also, supervision that genuinely leads through coaching and encouraging staff as equals in the production processes of the enterprise, will help maintain those relationships. Finally, the value of keeping a good reputation as an employer who really values staff will pay off in less staff turnover, greater productivity and job satisfaction.

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